

Program Notes for *C'est la Vie!* September 24, 2017

Roman Carnival Overture, Op. 9- Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

This is a stand-alone overture, not directly connected to an opera, although it is based on themes from his opera *Benvenuto Cellini*. Written in 1844, the overture was first performed that same year in the Salle Herz.

Berlioz' original intent with the overture was to open the second act of the opera; after the disastrous premiere of the opera a few years earlier, he decided to "reintroduce" it as an independent piece and as such, it has remained a favorite with orchestras and audiences throughout the years. It is very energetic and colorful and contains some of his most attractive melodies, particularly the slow Italianate melody for English horn which enters after the lively introduction. The fast moving parts of the overture are in the form of a saltarello, a very lively Italian dance.

Le Carnaval Romain has been, since its first performance, an extremely popular virtuoso showpiece, with its beautiful melodies, exciting dance rhythms and colorful orchestration. This is an auspicious beginning to this concert of French music.

Symphony in C

Georges Bizet (1838-1875)

This early work was written in 1855 when Bizet was a 17-year-old student of Charles Gounod. It is apparently written in imitation of Gounod's style, either as a study effort or as homage to his teacher. Why it was not performed or published is unknown, but in any event the work was lost until 1933. At that time, Bizet's biographer, Douglas Charles Parker, showed the recently discovered score to conductor Felix Weingartner, who conducted the premiere in 1935 in Basel, Switzerland.

The Symphony is in four movements; here are the details. First movement; the opening features a strongly rhythmic three-note theme [a chord outline] as a first subject. The second theme is slower in rhythmic activity and features the woodwinds.

Second movement; The movement starts slowly, with a rhythmic punctuation in the woodwinds. This punctuation leads directly to the main theme, a doleful minor key melody in the solo oboe. After this melody is complete, the strings expand on it in the major. This theme continues to develop and evolves into a quasi-fugal portion based on the rhythmic passage from the beginning of the movement. After the fugal section, the oboe theme returns, bringing the movement to a quiet close.

Third movement is a scherzo in $\frac{3}{4}$, one to the bar. This movement's theme is based on a chordal outline which leads to a long, flowing melody in the strings which closes the opening. The second section, played by the woodwinds, uses the notes and melodic pattern of the opening, but the style is now connected and flowing, over an ostinato in the low strings. After this section the opening is repeated directly.

Fourth movement; marked *Allegro vivace*, this movement makes considerable demands on the violins and upper woodwinds, with continuous 16th notes generating an exciting and nervous feeling. The

running-note theme [one reviewer called it a *moto perpetuo*] alternates with a kind of a fanfare passage which changes the rhythmic content while maintaining the “nervous” feeling. The next theme is more flowing, beginning in the strings and adding the woodwinds on the repeat. The reviewer mentioned above says that this finale can be compared with Bizet’s masterpiece *Carmen*.

La Mer, L. 109 (*The Sea*) Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

In writing *La Mer*, Debussy recalled childhood visions of the sea at Cannes, summers in Normandy, a frightening storm he’d experienced in a fishing boat, sea paintings by Joseph Turner and Japanese seascapes. In *La Mer*, instrumental color and rhythm become as important as harmony and melody. Unconventional methods – such as rising and falling figures, chords in parallel motion, and restless movement from key to key – evoke images of the restlessness of the sea.

Much has been said and written about the “Impressionism” in Debussy’s music. It is true that his music explores ways and means of creating musical forms and textures that were new and indeed unprecedented in music written prior to his composing, and also true that his inspiration often came from sources other than musical, such as the work of the Impressionist painters of the time. Debussy himself dismissed the term but there are many connections between the Impressionist painters and Debussy’s work, for example the shared interest in color for its own sake and the use of unresolved harmonic progressions, leading to a “wash” of sound, comparable to the similar wash of color in paintings of painters like Turner.

The “trois esquisses symphoniques pour orchestre” (*three symphonic sketches for orchestra*) consist of three movements; “From dawn to noon on the sea,” there is a split of the orchestral texture between an ever changing [mercurial] surface and a foundation of static or unmoving quality. The structure of the movement is difficult to define in traditional harmonic or formal terms, but it involves a gradual acceleration and intensification as the sea is portrayed as awakening, followed by a subsiding suggesting the depths of the sea, suggested by a brass chorale.

“Play of the waves,” fulfills the role of scherzo, especially in its restless, constant movement with unusual scales, cross rhythms and a depiction of waves as they move together, break up and reconnect.

“Dialogue of the wind and the sea,” is more traditional in its motivic structure, especially as there appear in it motives from the first movement. The rhythmic drive of this movement is also reminiscent of works of previous composers in its dramatic nature and its high level of rhythmic energy. To end the suite the tempo increases along with an increase in intensity, leading to a large, loud final “storm,” leaving everyone satiated and moved.